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John Walker: 'The Bizarre Case'

By Tom Kelly
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John A. Walker Jr., according to one credible authority, is satanic but he doesn't look like the devil.

If you had seen him on a May afternoon two years ago, he would have seemed a bemused, exceptionally hairy middle-aged man who had lost his way in Montgomery County.

Actually he was a spy, with beard, mustache and toupee, hard at work, the most remarkable spy yet identified in American history. If he lost his way, he lost it years before as an adolescent thief.

John Barron's book, "Breaking The Ring: The Bizarre Case of The Walker Family Spy Ring," published by Houghton Mifflin, presents Walker as a riddle and offers a simple and reasonable answer.

The author and his subject had the service in common. Both left the Navy to begin new careers — Mr. Barron to be a reporter at The Washington Star, then a writer for Reader's Digest; and Walker to be our most successful known traitor.

In 1985 they met and took each other's measure. Mr. Barron, who had served with Navy intelligence in Berlin in the 1950s and who enjoyed the confidence of the intelligence services in general, was helping the FBI.

"I was with him on three occasions," Mr. Barron said recently. "My primary, indeed my sole purpose, was to assess the accuracy of what he was saying about his relations with the KGB. I found everything he said very plausible.

"It was as if he was speaking about a third party, as if we were the audience watching a play. He would laugh about his own foibles and he was very accurate about the Soviets, about their incompetence. Once he remarked, 'They didn't run me. I ran them.' "

The running began in 1968 when Walker was a Naval warrant officer stationed at a boring job in Norfolk, Va., and life, he told Mr. Barron, seemed arid and meaningless. "Looking back," Walker said, "I think I had a death wish."

One gray January afternoon Walker parked his car in downtown Washington, looked up the address of the Soviet Embassy and took a taxi to 16th and K streets NW. He had with him a 30-day listing of key settings for a Navy cipher system and the Soviets gave him immediate, cautious attention.

Walker claims, and Mr. Barron agrees, he immediately gained the upper hand. When the Soviets bundled him out and drove him around town to shake off surveillance, he grew annoyed. "You [obscenities] are going to make me late for my watch," Walker told Mr. Barron he finally told them in exasperation.

That was the way he regarded everyone with whom he did business, including his spies. Mr. Barron said they were a motley bunch — Walker's ineffectual older brother, Arthur, a retired Navy officer; John's son Michael, a former Navy enlisted man who apparently just wanted his father's approval; and Jerry A. Whitworth, the former Navy chief in California who had critical access to the Navy's whole cryptographic system and who was clearly more a fool than fanatic.

Walker "couldn't stand" Whitworth, Mr. Barron said. "If you analyze the FBI evidence, the two were never together. When Walker would fly all the way to California to get whatever Whitworth had stolen, he spent as little time with him as he could. He didn't want to be around the guy."

Last November, Walker was sentenced to life and his son Michael received 25 years in prison. Walker's brother Arthur was sentenced in 1985 to life in prison and Whitworth received a 365-year sentence in August 1986.

Walker, a man of remarkable abilities but unremarkable appearance, could control and, if he wished, enchant most of those who came his way.

A San Francisco lawyer who had served with Walker on the USS Niagra Falls, a supply ship carrying vital cipher parts and machines, told Mr. Barron that Walker was highly regarded for his wit, unquestionably the most popular officer on the ship, and had a powerful effect on women.

"He is talented. He has a sort of cunning, instinctive capability to read people, high and low. He certainly did succeed in ingratiating himself, of dominating a great diversity of people. I do not understand the magnetism he exerted on women," Mr. Barron said.

Walker also attracted money. After he retired from the Navy in 1976 because he feared a security check would reveal his police record as a teen-age burglar, he continued in the spy business as a middle man. The Soviets would pay him over 17 years more than $500,000, possibly much more. In terms of value a gross underpayment, but there are limits on payments for spies.

"They would have paid him any practicable sum, but the KGB does not pay money according to what the product is worth," Mr. Barron said. "The money is an instrument of control. They don't want to pay too much . . . They don't want an agent to become too independent and there is the question of how much can someone of the backgrounds and circumstances of Whitworth or Walker absorb."

In Whitworth's case the problem was obvious. He was a ridiculously conspicuous consumer; he bought a $900 cockatoo and vast amounts of expensive lingerie for his wife and rented a white Rolls-Royce.

Walker was much shrewder. He ran a private detective agency in Norfolk which offered a plausible source of income (and which he apparently ran at a profit). It also offered an explanation for frequent trips and secretive behavior, and it gave him constant opportunity to dress up in disguises, once as a Ku Klux Klansman in full regalia.

"He liked the detective business. He certainly was zany, flamboyant. He would adopt poses most private detectives wouldn't, as a priest or a scout master, and he'd run all sorts of far-out operations but he was very diligent. He delivered what he said he would . . . and was well-regarded by the police."

There was irritation with his associates. His brother Arthur, who had a low-level job in a shipyard, was unproductive. His wife, Barbara, whom he forced to accompany him on some deliveries (and who he later divorced), and his daughter, Laurie, whom he tried to persuade to rejoin the Army to spy for him, would eventually turn him in.

The two who were productive, his son Michael and Whitworth, he treated, respectively, with indifference and contempt. Michael, stationed aboard the USS Nimitz, was given a single $1,000 payment for thousands of high-level stolen documents. Whitworth, the custodian of cryptographic machines and materials, was paid at least $300,000 for

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extremely valuable stuff, but Walker regarded him as a self-deluding phony.

Mr. Barron said the rating is accurate: "Whitworth was affected and pretentious. He fancied himself a gourmet but his idea of a great restaurant was some third-rate Indian place serving curry. Over the years he subscribed to 29 different financial journals but he invested in Krugerrands and worthless futures . . .

"He was very arrogant, which was part of his pretense, right up to the end . . . After his conviction he kept on lying to the FBI and they finally broke it off and then Whitworth started crying and denounced the agents for being sanctimonious."

Walker, by contrast, was cool and conscientious. He told Mr. Barron "the spy business is hard, hard, always traveling, running around in the woods." Which brings Mr. Barron to his final analysis of John Walker, the master spy.

When the FBI was first constructing its case, it tried to etch a psychological profile of Walker and it consulted Stanislav Levchenko, the former KGB agent who defected in Japan.

"Levchenko was a very astute student, recruiter and handler of agents and I was present out in San Francisco when they asked him about Walker and he said, 'Walker is a satanic figure. He is Svengali-like, activated by a very powerful ego to which you ought to play."

Mr. Barron thinks Mr. Levchenko's analysis is the only one that makes sense — Walker is satanic.

"He is, additionally, a sociopath, without any scintilla of value, principle, guiding morals. He is capable of anything. Nothing is sacred, not children."

He seemed, like Satan, to believe in only one peer.

"He was extraordinarily blasphemous. He would say something blood-curling and then he would laugh and say, 'Well, God will forgive me, he and I have a sense of humor."